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# Honduran Hospitality for Contras Wears Thin

By Anne Nelson

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**W**hen President Reagan asked Congress last week for \$100 million in aid for the Nicaraguan *contras*, he neglected to mention that another head of state, the new president of Honduras, may want some say in the matter. The *contras*, and the U.S. programs that support them, depend on the hospitality of Honduras to provide an operational springboard, and there are growing signs that the *contras* are wearing out their welcome.

In fact, there has been a public backlash against U.S. military policies in Honduras. One indication was the fate of the Regional Military Training Center at Puerto Castilla. Staffed and funded by the United States, the center was designed to provide advanced, joint training to Central American troops. But last year the Hondurans, who have a long-standing rivalry with El Salvador, blocked Salvadoran soldiers from attending the school; the United States gave up and closed it last June.

Honduran officials have also made sporadic objections to the use of national facilities for funneling U.S. aid to the *contras*. From October to December, only one plane load of the U.S. aid to the *contras* approved by Congress managed to get through past the Honduran authorities. This fall several shipments of aid were impounded at the airport, and U.S. officials have scrambled to put together civilian-front operations to get the aid through.

The Administration may have problems in delivering the next stage of aid to the *contras*. In December, President Reagan authorized the CIA to provide intelligence data, communications equipment, and training to the *contras*, and broadened the definition of "humanitarian aid" to include trucks. One reason for the difficulties in delivering the aid has been the growing resentment against the *contras* themselves, culminating last May when the Honduran government shut down three *contra* camps. In the southern border regions where they have taken up residence, the *contras* have committed a series of crimes against Honduran citizens, turning the normally apolitical peasantry against them. In 1984 these included reports of three armed robberies, the rape of a woman in front of her husband, two murders and three cases of forced recruitment at gunpoint. Such

abuses were reported to have grown in number and degree during 1985.

Honduran church officials have also accused the *contras* of acts of violence and extortion against the 3,000 Nicaraguan refugees who have fled the combat zones to Honduras. "The Nicaraguan refugees are afraid of the *contras*," commented one Catholic bishop. "They don't want to die in the mountains for either side." Church officials also link the *contras* to the country's rising urban crime rate. In the weeks before the elections, the national papers were filled with news about a gang that had been captured and charged with 60 violent crimes; the papers pointedly noted that four of the gang leaders were Nicaraguan exiles.

On Nov. 24, Hondurans went to the polls and elected Jose Azcona del Hoyo as their new president. The Hondurans, who have played host to the more than 10,000 *contras* for the last five years, did not focus on the exile army as a campaign issue; before the election, Azcona told a Honduran reporter that, while in principle he disapproved of the presence of the *contras* as an affront to national sovereignty, he hadn't yet "seen any proof" that there were any *contras* in Honduras.

This bland statement came on the heels of a front-page expose in the daily paper *Tiempo* documenting *contra* bivouacs and training centers in suburban Tegucigalpa, as well as the presence of two *contra* DC-6s parked and resupplied at Toncontin national airport. Azcona's leading opponent, conservative Rafael Callejas, was less equivocal: He welcomed the *contras* to counter the "Sandinista threat." But Azcona's minority opponent, Carlos Reina, took a strong stand against the *contra* presence. "In Honduras there should only be Honduran soldiers. Any other foreign military presence offends our dignity."

Former President Gen. Oswaldo Lopez Arrellano, uncle of the current minister of defense, has condemned the presence of the *contras* and the U.S. troops, saying, "It is having a strong impact and there is great resentment among the people." Hernan Corrales, the Christian Democratic presidential candidate, agreed. "I would forbid the use of our territory and would not allow any organization to provide logistical support to destabilize Central America." But Honduras has many pressing social and economic problems that the people take more seriously than the Sandinista threat. And Azcona

assumes office Monday, not Callejas. Since the elections, Azcona has said that the United States will have to reduce its military exercises in Honduras and increase economic aid. He now calls the presence of the *contras*, "unconstitutional," and says that "they will have to leave the country."

His inauguration takes place at a critical juncture for U.S. policy in Honduras. For the last five years, the United States has been building bases and airfields in Honduras, and pouring military aid into the Honduran armed forces, all in hopes of bolstering U.S. strategic aims against the Sandinistas and guerrilla forces in El Salvador. Honduras' last minister of defense, hard-liner Gustavo Alvarez, was eager to place his troops at the disposal of the Pentagon, and volunteered to lead a "Grenada-style" invasion of Nicaragua. But Alvarez was overthrown by his fellow officers in March, 1984, and his replacement, Gen. Walter Lopez, is far more reluctant to be involved in a regional conflict.

President-elect Azcona and his Joint Chiefs of Staff all realize that Honduras cannot afford to defy Washington openly. In the best of times, the Honduran economy depends on the United States as its major trading partner. Now, with the regional economy on the slide, U.S. military and economic grants and loans amount to more than a third of the country's national budget.

Besides, open defiance is not the Honduran way. It is more likely that Honduran officials will continue to breakfast with their Washington counterparts, signing treaties, accepting loans and pledging mutual support. At the same time, there will be more misplaced shipments, snarls at airport customs, troops that show up late for joint exercises and other varieties of passive aggression that can take place behind a diplomatic smile and a handshake. The Hondurans will not foreclose the Reagan Administration's plans for the region, but they may well continue to slow them down. □

Anne Nelson writes frequently about Central America.